

MILLARD FILLMORE.

The Ex-President's Views of the Political Situation.

BUFFALO, July 2, 1869.

I called to-day upon Mr. Millard Fillmore, ex-President of the United States, to ascertain that gentleman's views on the important public questions of the time. I found him at his law office in Court street—for he still practices in his profession. I was struck with the little change time had made in his appearance since I saw him fifteen years ago, and when he was the occupant of the White House. His hair is whiter and a little thinner, but he has the same erect and full rounded form, smooth skin, with scarcely a wrinkle, and all the appearance of well preserved health. He said he had not varied in weight more than ten pounds since he was President, and thought he might have been about that much heavier when in the Presidential chair. I found him the same dignified, courtly and affable gentleman for which he was always distinguished when in public life.

When I handed my card and announced to him the object of my visit he said he had retired from public life, desired the repose and quiet of a private gentleman and did not wish to offer his opinions for publication, as his views and motives might be misrepresented. He alluded to the misrepresentation of his views by a radical paper in New York in asserting that he was in favor of an imperial government for this country, and he seemed to think he could only escape such falsehoods about himself by absolute silence and non-interference with public affairs. Not, he said, that he did not feel the deepest interest in the welfare of the country or that he had anything to conceal. He did not think the publication of his views would do any good and might subject him to misrepresentation and annoyance. He talked freely with me, however, for more than an hour on great questions of public interest, but added, when I rose to take my leave, "I beg of you not to mention me in the papers."

At the commencement of my conversation with Mr. Fillmore I took the liberty of arguing against his reticence with regard to the public. I maintained that it is from men like himself, from men who have filled the highest positions and who have had the greatest experience in public affairs, that we should look for wisdom, enlarged views and guidance. I referred to the admirable custom in China, semi-civilized as we are in the habit of regarding the Chinese, of paying great respect to the opinions and even admonitions of retired statesmen. A man who has passed through all the grades of official rank to be to be a mandarin of the highest class, and then, from old age or other cause retires, is still looked up to for council on important occasions. Indeed, any one of these experienced sages may reprove the Emperor himself for misconduct or unwise measures, and sometimes does so, notwithstanding the peculiar sacredness with which his Imperial Majesty is invested. The intelligence and great experience of this class of retired high officials constitute the reserved wisdom of the country, which both the people and actual government look to with respect and veneration, particularly when the times are out of joint or great questions of policy come up. Probably the long existence, stability and wonderful prosperity of the Chinese empire may be attributed in part to this conservative feature in the institutions of the country. I alluded, too, to the fact that in this age all really great and liberal-minded statesmen recognize the power and usefulness of the press, and make that the machine of enlightening or correcting public opinion. I gave as a particular example Count Bismarck's recent remarkable conversation with the correspondent of the HERALD—a conversation promptly accorded upon application of the correspondent, and the time appointed by the Minister himself for it when he knew the object was to publish what he might say. This was really more important than a State paper or a speech in the Prussian Parliament, because he spoke without reserve and in plain terms, both as to his own position with regard to the King and political parties and as to the domestic and foreign policy of Prussia. Of course he was aware that the views he expressed, though published in the leading journal of a distant country, would go back to Europe and be spread over Germany and the Continent. In thus recognizing the power and usefulness of the press Bismarck showed the same grasp and comprehensiveness of mind which have marked his public conduct throughout. In conclusion, I suggested to Mr. Fillmore that his views would have more weight because he has no political aspirations or party, and that all prejudiced and right thinking people would believe he desired only to serve his country, whether they should agree with him in opinion or not.

The first subject of conversation introduced was that of General Grant and his administration. Mr. Fillmore believes General Grant means well and wishes to do right, but that through his inexperience in politics and public affairs he has got himself into the meshes of the politicians and has lost the finest opportunity of benefiting the country. He referred particularly to General Grant's position immediately after the inauguration with regard to the Tenure of Office act and the difficulties which the politicians in Congress raised about the Cabinet. He thinks that had Grant been firm in requiring the repeal of the Tenure of Office act and the confirmation of his Cabinet as first formed the Senate would have yielded; for Grant held at that time the confidence of the people and would have been supported by them. Besides, Senators as well as members of the House, wanted the distribution of the offices, and the President had, in the power of nomination, the winning card. Had he refused to make any appointments, unless this act were repealed, the Senators would have been so impressed by his firmness and so anxious to get the offices for their friends and supporters that they would have swept the act from the statute book. Nor would they have embarrassed the President about his Cabinet nor have led him to change the original cast of it to suit their political views and ends. Distasteful as were his first Cabinet appointments and the policy in making them to these politicians, and much as they wished to cling to the power they had acquired over the Executive, they would have surrendered for the sake of the offices, and in face of Grant's firmness and popularity, had he been determined and unmoved. It was a glorious opportunity to restore the equilibrium, which had been destroyed by the usurpations of Congress, between the different branches of the government. The ex-President regards that issue as involving the greatest consequences—an issue the importance of which General Grant failed to comprehend, and which may change forever the practical operation of the government. Looking at the tendency of all public bodies to usurp power and the tenacity with which they cling to it when once acquired, it may be a long time, if ever, before the opportunity occurs to restore the former equilibrium between Congress, the Executive and judiciary. The danger is that under the name of a representative and federative republic the government may become an oligarchy of politicians. When speaking of this Mr. Fillmore took from his library Washington's Farewell Address, and read that portion of it in which the father of his country pointed out the danger of Congress absorbing those powers of government which properly belong to the Executive and judiciary, and in which he seemed almost to have a prophetic knowledge of the present state of things. Washington said it must lead to despotism in one form or another, and Mr. Fillmore fears that this may be the case, unless by some extraordinary and providential circumstances the people should be aroused from their apathy and see the danger that insidiously threatens our republican institutions.

In speaking of the suffrage the ex-President said the great mistake made by the radicals, and seemingly by the country, just now, is that this was a natural right and not a political right or privilege. Hence the suffrage has been given to millions of benighted negroes who scarcely know their right hands from their left, and who can have no knowledge of what they vote for. Having given the suffrage to the negroes it cannot be refused to the millions upon millions of Chinese who are coming to this country, and who are a superior race to the negroes. This is a serious evil in the future to contemplate. But he does not see how the suffrage is to be taken away or restricted when once given. We are rushing on in the way of political revolution, and it seems that it must run its course to the extreme point of radicalism. It will be fortunate if this does not culminate in a *sans-culotte régime*, to be followed by another kind of despotism or personal dictatorship. When speaking of this state of things Mr. Fillmore referred to one of the old Italian republics, that of Florence, I think, where revolutionary and radical equality was carried to such an extreme that elections for office to administer the government were done away with, and officers were taken by lot from the whole community. As a matter of course the most ignorant became the rulers, for they were the most numerous. The consequence was that with this radical attempt to force equality where no natural or real equality existed liberty soon expired and despotism succeeded. Mr. Fillmore admits that the suffrage should be on the broadest practicable basis, and remarked that England and all other civilized countries were tending to that; but it should be held only as a general rule, by those who know how to use it. Still he had hope that the evils of extending the suffrage to the ignorant masses of other races would be corrected in a measure by the progress of education, the preponderance of the Caucasian race and the enlightened patriotism of the American people.

Mr. Fillmore is a hard money man and thinks that it would be a great blessing to return to specie payments. He sees, however, great difficulties in the way of reaching that object, not the least of which will be found in the national banks. He holds to the old theory of contracting the currency as the only means of coming to specie payments, yet thinks it possible this may be ultimately attained by the Supreme Court of the United States declaring the legal tender act unconstitutional and the greenbacks not a legal tender. His opinion is that the Supreme Court has staved off this delicate and the main issue to prevent financial trouble to the country and embarrassment to the government, but that it can be brought up, and probably will be some time. He says that if we are to have a paper currency, or as long as we may have it, it ought to be uniform; that the greenbacks should be the only currency, and that to give the banks the profits of a national circulation—a gratuity of near eighteen millions in gold a year to private corporations—is a reckless extravagance and a fraud upon the people. The government

should get this profit and apply it to the payment of the debt, or to lessening the burdens of taxation. Yet he doubts if this evil can be remedied, as the national banks possess immense power, and as two-thirds of the members of Congress, probably, are interested, directly or indirectly, in these banking institutions.

Sooner or later the ex-President apprehends a great financial crisis as the result of excessive importations and the extravagance of the people, which drains not only the specie from the country, but which causes as well our bonds to be sent abroad in great quantities to pay for these importations. This state of things will keep the people of the United States laboring, and their noses to the grindstone, for the benefit of foreign capitalists. Whenever a crisis comes our bonds will be sent back from Europe and cause great trouble to the government and country.

In referring to the depressed condition and decline of American shipping and shipping interests Mr. Fillmore thinks the duties on shipbuilding materials should be removed or greatly modified. This would set our shipyards at work and increase our mercantile marine. Nor should our merchants be prevented, under the present circumstances, from building or buying ships abroad. The great thing now is to revive our mercantile marine and to increase our tonnage so as to get a good share, at least, of the profits of the carrying trade, which is now monopolized by England and other countries. For this purpose the registry laws ought to be repealed. While on this subject, and the subject of protection in general, he remarked that his views had somewhat changed, or rather that the changed circumstances of the country required a different policy to that pursued years ago. He had been a protectionist, and had, in 1842, as chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means of Congress, reported the Tariff bill which was then passed, and which was protective in its character. But since that time the manufactures of the country had been put on a good footing, were able to stand alone with such incidental protection as government necessity and convenient home markets would afford, and there ought no longer to be restrictions upon trade and a tax upon the whole community for the benefit of a few. England has modified her policy in this respect, and it is the part of statesmanship to adapt measures to suit the varying circumstances of the times. Hence Mr. Fillmore, who was once a protectionist, now favors free trade.

On the question of Cuba and the action of the government Mr. Fillmore is conservative. While admitting that the condition of things in Cuba and with regard to the struggle there for independence is different from the filibustering movement during his administration, when he had to enforce the neutrality laws against General Quitman and others, yet he says the administration of General Grant has only one course or duty to pursue, and that is to execute the laws. We may sympathize with the Cubans and desire the acquisition of Cuba, but a great nation should act honorably in performing its obligations to friendly Powers. This is sound in principle, undoubtedly, but all great nations strain a point in such cases on the side of their own interests or of popular feeling. Indeed, when important national interests are involved, and particularly when there is a question of national expansion or increase of power, all great Powers act upon the principle of self-interest.

After nearly two hours' conversation on these topics, and finding I had occupied the time of the ex-President up to his dinner hour (two o'clock), I apologized and left. While I acknowledge his affability and courtesy to me personally I must confess that his anxiety to be at ease and to have no trouble about public affairs or in the discussion of them did not look like elevated patriotism. To wrap one's self up in reserve and dignity or to study only one's own ease does not, in the case of a former distinguished public functionary, like Mr. Fillmore, savor of that exalted patriotism which would lead a man to die for his country. But it is not so with him alone. Most of our retired public men of distinction, and many who are still in public life, seem to dread the publication of their views or expressions through the press. This is selfish, unpatriotic and a mistake. Every man should do what he can for the good of his country, even though he may suffer annoyance by it, and especially those who have enjoyed the highest honors of public life, and whose experience should give value to their opinions. Let us know what the prominent men of the country think, for in these abnormal and revolutionary times we need all the wisdom that can be found.